The Composition Program

We all participate daily in communities where diversity of opinion requires communication in order to achieve cooperation. Education is often thought of as a path to a good job, but it is also and more broadly a means of achieving freedom and the ability to communicate within such communities. In this sense, education promotes not just freedom from obstacles to independent thought and action, but also the ability to reach reasoned decisions and to express them publicly. These goals converge in the process of inquiry, communication, and debate that forms the primary activity of the composition classroom. The fact that there are many ways to achieve these goals illustrates their complexity. In our methods and styles of teaching, we mirror the kind of diversity that is to be expected among serious teachers.

This diversity obliges us to inquire, to communicate, and to reason together in order to achieve cooperation and to come to agreements. Any course that we plan, any assignment that we give, or any critical comment that we make about our students’ writing can be submitted to this test: Are my expectations and teaching techniques helping my students to achieve responsibility for the communication of their ideas? Following are features of the essays and the process students use to write them that we can use to test the results of the decision we make in our teaching.

Outcomes

Students should be capable of writing papers with the following qualities at a level of mastery appropriate to the end of the first year of college:

The Logical and Rhetorical Core

The essay develops and responds to a significant question that is relevant to the context in which it is written and appropriate for the audience to which it is addressed.

The essay provides the necessary background for understanding the importance and implications of the question, and the essay acknowledges and explains what has already been said about its subject.

The essay gives a logical answer to the question, in the form of a thesis and a line of reasoning that supports the thesis.

The essay clearly organizes and presents the line of reasoning that supports the thesis.

The essay responds to the needs of the audience—for example, by explaining difficult ideas or defining unfamiliar terms, by giving examples where they are needed, by anticipating possible misunderstandings, and by developing its ideas in a recognizable order.
The essay responds to at least one competing answer and line of reasoning or at least one objection that could be brought to bear against its case.

The essay is unified around the task of asking and answering a question and does not wander from its purpose.

The Techniques and Mechanics of Writing

The essay demonstrates a control of syntax, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

The essay uses paragraphing to separate ideas and to make reading fluent and efficient. It also uses of transitions and summaries to show the relations between paragraphs and larger divisions in the essay.

The essay shows skillful integration of quotations and appropriately formatted documentation of sources.

The introduction and conclusion clarify and strengthen the unity of the essay.

The tone and register are appropriate to the subject matter and the audience.

The essay’s style promotes clarity, expresses voice, and keeps the reader interested.

The Processes of Writing

Students should have also experienced and mastered the following parts of the writing process at a level appropriate for the end of the first year of college:

Students read sympathetically and critically to inform themselves about an issue and to discover a significant question.

Students participate in discussions to clarify and increase their understanding of an issue, to test the significance of their questions and the initial plausibility of their answers, and to discover the different perspectives on the issue taken by other students.

Students test and improve a complete thesis and an initial plan for an essay with other students in a workshop setting.

Students write a first version of an essay—the best possible based on what has been learned up to that point.

Students write structured commentaries on other students’ first versions that mirror back an understanding of the argument, give responses to the writing, and offer suggestions for improvement.
Students receive commentaries from other students and from the teacher, and use them to write a better version of the essay.

Students revise their essays in a process of reconsidering the logical and rhetorical core of the essay as well as the techniques and mechanics of writing.

Students reflect in writing on what has been learned in the process of writing, and identify areas in which improvement is still desired.

**Course Descriptions**

In WR 121, 122, and 123, the process of argument is taught as a process of responsible inquiry, as opposed to persuasion for its own sake. Students learn that open-minded inquiry includes attending seriously to the argument of people who may be very different from themselves and judging others’ ideas fairly and according to the quality of reasons offered in their support. Students learn the importance of earning their conclusions in this context. Logic alone is not a sufficient means to this end, since the success of a fully developed argument will depend on the writer’s attitude and ability to understand the audience.

**Writing 121**

WR121 is a college-level course in written reasoning that presents writing as a means of exploring, developing, confirming, and communicating ideas. The ideas that students write about develop from their understanding of issues encountered in readings and focused discussions. Students compose essays that support and develop a significant, enthymeme-based thesis, and they learn to make structural and rhetorical choices based both on the requirements of that thesis and on their knowledge of the audience. They are taught to practice open-minded inquiry into ideas so that their writing will be based on honest and defensible reasoning. They learn how clear and effective communication is a way of showing respect for one’s audience. They learn the importance of revision in the process of written reasoning, and they learn to become better critical readers of their own and others’ prose. The purpose of this form of argumentation is not to “prove” one’s own ideas or to “win” by defeating an opponent. Rather, it is to discover the best available reasons to support one’s own ideas by examining them in relation to the competing ideas and reasoning of other people. Thus conceived, argumentation is the development and support of one’s ideas in the context of an understanding of and respect for the ideas of others.

WR121 students are typically required to write three academic papers, each revised; in addition to rigorous academic papers, part of the course work in WR121 should include reflective essays on the learning that students see taking place in their own writing. Formal, polished academic writing ranges between 8,000 and 11,000 words, including both versions of each essay. A range of other writing opportunities, such as reading notebooks, in-class writing, or peer commentaries may be included, but only formal writing counts toward the word count for the course. Reading assignments are required, both to develop students’ ability to understand arguments and concepts with
which they may be unfamiliar and to provide them with a context of ideas for composing their own essays. Students are encouraged to discuss their responses openly in class, both to develop a sense of what questions are at issue with regard to the text under consideration, and to come to a more concrete sense of the audience for whom they write.

In addition, WR121 provides students with the opportunity and means to improve grammatical, mechanical and stylistic skills; this course also provides an opportunity to become familiar with an academic environment where the conventions of advanced written communication are practiced.

**Writing 122**

In addition to the concepts covered in WR121, WR122 focuses on specific ways to develop argumentative essays in response to the challenges of complex contexts, which should include increasingly sophisticated competing arguments and issues, as well as an expansion of enthymeme-based arguments. The course works best if it emphasizes and builds on the goals established in WR121.

Students practice further how to develop effective theses and compose essays in which they control the reasoning that supports their theses. The course emphasizes critical reading of more intellectually demanding essays than those read in WR 121. In addition to writing three rigorous academic papers, part of the course work in WR122 should include reflective essays on the learning that students see taking place in their own writing. Formal, polished academic writing ranges between 12,000 and 16,000 words in three essays, with both versions included in the word count. A range of other writing opportunities, such as reading notebooks, in-class writing, or peer commentaries may be included. Reading assignments are required, both to develop students’ ability to understand arguments and concepts with which they may be unfamiliar and to provide them with a context of ideas for composing their own essays.

**Writing 123**

WR123 shares the aims of WR122, with the added requirement that students develop their arguments in response to some independent research into the questions at issue that they are addressing in their argumentative essays. The course guidelines below were developed by the Composition Committee following an extensive study of the “term paper” often associated with research writing.

1. WR123 addresses the problems of controlling the structures and strategies of writing that makes appropriate use of information, arguments, and counter-arguments found in relevant sources. As such, its objectives parallel those of WR122, which focuses on argumentative writing based on the logical development of an adequate thesis, generated in response to critical reading and discussion.

2. WR123 is not a course in how to take notes, organize notes and research, punctuate footnotes, or other basic tasks of research writing. Although students with problems in these areas will, of course, be helped by the instructor, such matters do not constitute the content of this course. However, the use of accurate, honest, and effective documentation as a part of the writing process is crucial. Students may be required to follow the guidelines in the *Rules for Writers* (6th ed) or a supplemental research writing text regarding note-taking and related research tasks.
3. Although WR123 is not a course in how to use the library, teachers will recognize a need for their students to gain some orientation to the University library. Research guides, available by discipline and subject (http://libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/) will help orient students to research in specific areas. At an appropriate point in the term, teachers may choose to supplement this online material with a presentation by a librarian who can demonstrate the use of periodical indexes and show how to locate articles in the library. You may contact a reference librarian directly, or the Head of Reference and Research Services can schedule library presentations and answer questions on integrating research strategies into WR123.

4. Although more reading may be expected than in WR121 and a longer essay may be required, the course does not focus on the production of a single term paper, and it should not pose requirements in terms of minimum numbers or kinds of sources. Students should be given the opportunity, in several essays, to practice the art of responding critically to what they read, especially when it challenges what they already think. Research is critical inquiry and discovery, not amassing authorities to prove an unexamined idea or, worse yet, to provide a simple patchwork of what authorities say.

5. Students may not write essays on whatever they want, based on whatever fields they are simultaneously studying. There is no reason that the process of writing well-structured and well-reasoned responses to sources must be learned exclusively in the area of one’s special expertise. Readings should be discussed in common with other members of the class, and writing assignments should be in response to issues generated by readings and discussion.

6. Students may not submit essays for WR123 that they have already handed in or intend to hand in to some other class.

7. All sections of WR123 share the same goals; however, in the coming year, some individual sections will focus on one of four curricular threads: 1) the rhetoric of information; 2) research and electronic archives/databases; 3) research and public speaking; 4) research and major intellectual arguments.

In WR123, as in the other courses, students should have ample opportunity to practice revision, both before and after essays are evaluated for a grade by the teacher. A range of other writing opportunities, such as reading notebooks, in-class writing, position papers, peer evaluations, research proposals, summaries, or progress reports may be included. In addition, students in WR123 who continue to need such instruction should be given the opportunity and the means to improve grammatical, mechanical, and stylistic skills.